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AUTHOR	Paulsen, Michael B.; Feldman, Kenneth A.
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ABSTRACT

Based on a longer report with the same title, this digest summarizes current efforts to increase the quality of college teaching. The report uses a model that views strategies for improving instruction as helping motivate individual faculty members to improve their teaching by actively changing (and maintaining) certain of their instructional attitudes and practices. The model focuses on utilizing varieties of informative feedback from such sources as colleagues and consultants, department chairs, students, and self that are facilitated by a supportive teaching culture. The report addresses the following concerns: (1) characteristics of a supportive teaching culture (such as administrator support for instructional improvement); (2) strategies to help college teachers evaluate themselves (such as self-reports); (3) the role of students in improving teaching (through teacher and course evaluations); (4) the role of colleagues, consultants, and department chairs (faculty collaboration through peer observation and provision of feedback); (5) the special needs of new and junior faculty (workshops and mentoring programs); and (6) the role of the college (strengthening of supportive teaching cultures). (DB)

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The George Washington University
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Taking Teaching Seriously

Meeting the Challenge of Instructional Improvement

Michael B. Paulsen and Kenneth A. Feldman

"Taking Teaching Seriously" is drawn from a celebrated address by K. Patricia Cross at the 1986 AAHE National Conference on Higher Education in Washington, D.C. In her address, Cross emphasized the importance of efforts to increase the quality of college teaching. This report uses a model that views various strategies for improving instruction as helping motivate individual faculty members to improve their teaching by changing (and maintaining) certain of their instructional attitudes and practices (through the process of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing certain attitudes and behaviors). This model focuses on the varieties of informative feedback–from such sources as colleagues and consultants, chairs, students, and oneself–that are facilitated by a supportive teaching culture and that drive the process of instructional improvement.

What Are the Primary Characteristics of a Supportive Teaching Culture?

The presence of a culture that is supportive of teaching clearly enhances the effectiveness of all strategies for improving instruction. The literature consistently identifies the following characteristics of cultures that support teaching and its improvement: unambiguous commitment to and support of teaching and its improvement from senior administrators; shared values about the importance of teaching between administrators and faculty, with widespread involvement of faculty in planning and implementing activities and programs to improve teaching, thus creating a sense of faculty "ownership" of these activities and programs; the presence of effective department chairs who are supportive of teaching and its improvement; frequent interaction and collaboration among faculty and a sense of community among faculty regarding teaching-related issues; a faculty development program or campus teaching center; a broad, expanded view of scholarship and scholarly activities; decisions about tenure and promotion connected to rigorous evaluations of teaching; and a requirement that some demonstration of effective teaching be part of interviewing and hiring new faculty (Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck 1994; Rice and Austin 1990).

What Strategies for Improving Instruction Help Teachers Provide Informative Feedback to Themselves?

Because college teachers often have a strong need to seek self-determined competence by continuously scanning the instructional environment for informative feedback, their behavior can be examined and the source of changes in their behavior understood by viewing them as "reflective practitioners." Activities that constitute such practice-centered inquiry have been shown to be useful strategies for improving instruction (Amundsen, Gryspeerdt, and Moxness 1993). The ultimate foundation of all reflective practice or self-reflection is the ability and opportunity to engage in self-evaluation or self-assessment. Two common methods of collecting self-evaluation feedback at universities involve the use of self-rating forms and self-reports. At some colleges and universities, for example, faculty are asked to complete the same (or slightly reworded) questionnaires to evaluate teaching as their students. This procedure enables faculty to analyze their teaching and to reflect on their teaching behaviors along the same dimensions their students use to evaluate them. A second method, self-reports completed by college professors, has traditionally been limited to vitae and reports of activities; recently, however, the idea of self-reports has been conceptually and functionally expanded into a medium, compendium, and showcase for reflective practice–namely, the teaching portfolio, which is essentially an elaborate and reflective form of self-evaluation (Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan 1991).

How Can Students Make Their Voices Heard?

Students hardly need to be "silent partners" in the enterprise of improving teaching. One way their voices can be heard is through their completing teacher and course evaluations. Research has shown persistently that feedback from student ratings is of value in improving teaching, particularly if this feedback is accompanied by the teacher's consulting with a colleague or a teaching consultant (L'Hommedieu, Menges, and Brinko 1990). Several different ways of using student interviews for giving feedback to teachers have also been reported as successful strategies for improving instruction, including group discussions, small-group instructional diagnosis, the class interview, and quality control circles. A particularly distinctive way of receiving feedback from students is for a professor to invite students into his or her classroom who are not "official" members of the class but who are trained in classroom observation. A student-visitor program primarily provides confidential observations to increase the instructor's effectiveness in helping students learn. Another strategy for "listening" to students has been called "classroom assessment," which consists of a wide range of methods college teachers can use to obtain useful feedback on what, how much, and how well their students are learning (Angelo and Cross 1993).

How Can Colleagues, Consultants, and Chairs Be Helpful in Improving Teaching?

Faculty seminars, workshops, and colloquia about teaching are traditional (but still effective) practices for encouraging interaction and collaboration among faculty regarding teaching. Recent developments in a variety of areas–action science, reflective practice, adult learning theory, and the like–have encouraged an expanded range of strategies using colleagues to help improve teaching. One important set of activities, programs, and projects

in this expansion is the renewed use of team teaching (Baldwin and Austin 1995). Faculty collaboration through team teaching benefits professors by developing their teaching abilities, intellectually stimulating them, engaging them as self-directed learners, and more closely connecting them to the university or college as a community. A second set of programs and practices is collegial coaching (Keig and Waggoner 1994). Two primary activities involved in collegial coaching are observation of classroom teaching and instructional consultation (the review of course materials and discussions about classroom practices). Based on descriptions and analyses of coaching projects at colleges and universities, effective programs have all or most of the following characteristics: an underlying philosophy; a procedure for selecting participants; a training program for collegial coaches; a preobservation conference; one or more classroom visits and observations; a postobservation conference; and a chance for participants to evaluate their effectiveness.

Many of the informal processes of consultation carried out in collegial coaching projects have been formalized in a comprehensive set of more routine services provided by the trained consultants who constitute the staff of campus teaching centers. Instructional consultation is usually based on a comprehensive model that includes data collection and analysis by the consultant, strategies for improvement worked out between the consultant and the teacher, and evaluation (Lewis and Povlacs 1988). Consultation improves teaching primarily through the use of effective practices in giving feedback (often associated with student ratings and direct observation or videotapes of classroom teaching) and through the various interpersonal roles assumed by consultants.

Department chairs are also important to the improvement of teaching. One way they help is by providing support–financial and otherwise–to ongoing formal and informal attempts to improve teaching. They are invaluable in defining faculty development and instructional improvement (as distinct from faculty evaluation) as an important departmental activity. They can plan programs for the department, such as pedagogical colloquia, that help improve teaching. They can even intervene more directly by following steps similar to those used in instructional consultation (Creswell, Wheeler, Seagren, Egly, and Beyer 1990).

How Can the Special Needs for Improving the Teaching of New and Junior Faculty Be Met?

Because new faculty members share common concerns about such matters as workload and stress from multiple demands, uncertainty about what is expected of them, a desire for collegial support, and a need to develop teaching skills, a strong argument can be made for supplementing traditional, individual approaches of socialization that help them adjust to their new environment with a collective approach that address these common concerns. Workshops and "substantial" orientation programs for new faculty members that offer concrete assistance with the development of teaching skills and with various common problems are being used successfully in a variety of colleges and universities. In addition, formal mentoring programs for new and junior faculty are also being used at different schools to give concrete assistance with the development of teaching skills, to address professional and personal concerns, and, in general, to counter the vagaries of the usually informal socialization of new college teachers (Boice 1992; Sorcinelli and Austin 1992).

What Can Colleges Do to Improve Teaching?

Several approaches, used in concert, can be used to improve instruction in colleges and universities. Ways need to be found to "unfreeze" certain attitudes and behaviors of some teachers that prevent them from improving their teaching. Supportive teaching cultures on campus must be strengthened, especially at those colleges where such cultures are subsidiary to more dominant cultures. More teachers need to be given guided experience in being "reflective practitioners." Students should be treated (and sought out) as active partners in the improvement of instruction. Formal and informal collaboration among colleagues should be rewarded. Chairs need to be encouraged to offer their invaluable support through their creation of an environment conducive to effective teaching. Trained consultants, often though not invariably associated with a campus teaching center, should be recognized as the experts they are in instructional improvement and their activities facilitated. And new and junior faculty must be encouraged and helped with their teaching through programs recognizing their special needs and talents.

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